

# Port Hardy, British Columbia: In Search of the Emerald Sea

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I am very fortunate to have Southern Lake Michigan just a twenty minute drive from my home. I can dive any time I'd like but the terrain can get a bit repetitive after a time. As much fun as it is to dive 140 year old schooners, about once a year I feel the need to broaden my dive horizons. You know, try someplace off the beaten path, so I considered my options and I had wanted to dive the Pacific Northwest, I had, after all read so much about it and how it is the crème de la crème of temperate diving. I recruited my dive buddy Tim from Iowa, and trekked two suitcases full of coldwater dive gear, complete with my trusty but heavy vulcanized rubber drysuit, and one DSLR underwater camera system in it's own armor plated, FAA approved carry-on-legal case which weighed in at a respectable 33 pounds, to the other side of the continent in search of the "Emerald Sea". Final destination a 'dive resort' north of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada by the name of Browning Pass Hideaway.

A plane ride to the Pacific Northwest's northern coast and we were ready to take the one and half hour boat ride from Port Hardy to The Hideaway. John DeBoeck picks up his guests in an aluminum scallop fishing boat turned transport, at the public dock in the harbor. The boat is not fast, but it can haul a lot of gear and is quite sea worthy. Keep your eyes on the horizon on the trip up, as there is always a chance you will see one of the resident or transient Orca pods, or the occasional Humpback Whale. If you've never been to this corner of the world your eyes will be glued to the beauty of craggy basalt rock formations capped by old-growth timber where Kingfishers and American Bald Eagles make their homes. Starting with the boat ride over, we were in awe.

The Hideaway is a series of small wooden structures built on top of several layers of criss-crossed old timber, which keeps the whole thing afloat. It is anchored down to the bottom of a long narrow bay know as Clam Cove. The cove is well protected from the open ocean's waves with only slight movement. There is a communal kitchen with a large table in the center where everybody sits to share meals and stories of the day's dives. There are two buildings where the guests sleep, each one like a little apartment. We stayed in the 'bunk house' where there was ample room to work on our cameras, and plenty of outlets for chargers. Our 'house' was furnished and outside on the deck there was a fire pit. A pair of resident sea lions living in the maze of logs under our house only woke me up a couple of times, apparently they were arguing over who caught more pilchard that evening.

Everything up here is controlled by one thing, the tides. The tides determine when you dive. You come to Browning Pass Hideaway to dive; this is what John will tell you. We did 3 dives a day, sometimes 4, with each dive being a separate trip out to the pass. Nearly all the dive sites are a quick fifteen-minute boat ride or less, in John's trusty skiff. Never having to swap tanks allows you to set up your BCD, regs and gear on the skiff once, and after every dive all you need to do is detach your first stage to let John

know the tank needs refilling. After returning to the dock, you can soak your camera in the provided fresh water rinse tank while John "squishes air" as he puts it, for your next dive.

With site names like "Eagle Rock", "Seven Tree Island", and "Rock of Life", one would expect the dives to be unique and memorable. Actually they are all that and more. More macro life, more fish and more 'need to see' creatures like Wolf Eels and Giant Pacific Octopus. These are the most spectacular dives I have ever done. I have seen many pretty reefs in the corners of the Caribbean, but I have never seen layer upon layer of life blanketing every square inch of available rock like in Browning Pass. The star attraction of this 1300 ft deep channel is known simply as "Browning Wall". It is a 900 ft long by 200 ft tall flat rock wall that plays host to the most impressive kaleidoscope of life imaginable. Yellow Sponges, Red Soft Corals, Plumose Anemones, Hydroids, Starfish, crustaceans big and small, and fish like the Red Irish Lord and China Rockfish overpower your senses with bright colors and exotic textures. Vis ranged from fifteen to thirty feet during our sixteen dives. This place is a macro photographer's dream come true, though wide angle shooters will enjoy capturing a diver's silhouette against the surface's natural light while at the same time lighting up the wall with a strobe making each shot a "keeper". I was told that the vis improves greatly in spring and fall, often exceeding fifty feet.

Diving with John is the main attraction to staying at The Hideaway. I believe that there simply is nobody on Canada's West coast better at reading the water, knowing the tides and the sites and placing you in at perfect slack. The Hideaway is also photographer friendly. For more than three decades John has hosted countless National Geographic photographers and other professionals of both film and print, who come to him with shopping lists of things they need to shoot. They depend on him to know where their subjects have the best chance of being found and putting them and their gear in the water at the right time. He delivers on a regular basis.

Diving all these great sites for the first couple of times, you kind of want to travel around a bit to see what is on the back side of that pinnacle, or just past the next ridge. Divers should have a safety sausage as a back up but you will likely never deploy it in all your trips to Browning Pass. John sits topside in the trusty skiff keeping a watchful eye on everybody's bubbles like a mother hen.

Depending on your depth, when you are down to seven or eight hundred pounds of air in your tank you head for the surface and begin your safety stop. If you are at a site with the Pacific Bull Kelp you can hang out and look for little crabs or small Cross Jellyfish near the surface. All the dives are a 'free ascent' meaning that there is no anchor line to come up. You usually will have a life encrusted wall to use as a visual reference if you need it, and often times the kelp can serve as a line to hold onto if your buoyancy is a little off or you don't want to drift in the current. Depths range from the surface to past 150 feet, but the best zones are between 50 and 90 as this is where the largest variety of life can be found. We also noticed the visibility almost always improved below 40 feet. I found it beneficial to keep my dives between 50 to 80 feet to conserve on gas and make the most of my all too short stay in this wildly beautiful place.

Water temps ranged from the low to high forties depending on the site and time, and is always the most incredible shade of green. It only takes one dive to see why the region

has been coined the "Emerald Sea". The proliferation of life is staggering, from the forests of giant Plumose Anemones to the huge schools of Rockfish that play in the kelp. Decorator and Hermit Crabs are everywhere, and many varieties of brightly colored starfish and Nudibranchs can be found slowly going about their business as other larger creatures such as Ling Cod, Puget Sound King Crab and Octopus stake out their own little sections of watery real estate. Though I did not get the chance to be greeted underwater by a Sea lion, I did manage to check off nearly all of the creatures on my 'need to see' list.

I found The Hideaway to be exactly what I wanted, a functional platform from which to dive the ultimate temperate water sites. I also found John to be most humble, and patient. He is always at a loss for words when a diver comes up from a great dive and says, "John, that was incredible, thanks!" His position is this: "I didn't carve out these underwater canyons and plant the anemones; I just nail the slack occasionally". The friendly staff and John's memorable stories make this a great dive destination. If you want the best dive sites with the best guide in Browning Pass, look no further. The only reason I was able to choke back a tear upon boarding the Saab 340A Turbo Prop back to Vancouver, and ultimately the real world, was the little voice in my head telling me I would be back that way again someday.